Votes For Ladies

The Suffrage Movement 1867 - 1918

Sheila McNeil

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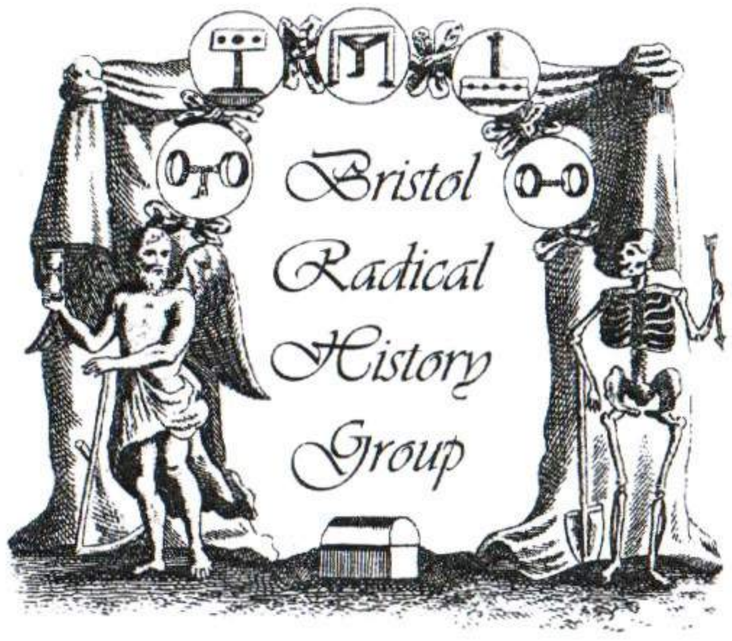

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WWW.BRH.ORG.UK
BRH@BRH.ORG.UK

Introduction

The Suffragette Movement is one of the most well known stories in the struggle for further emancipation of the people in Britain. Almost everybody has heard about when Emily Davison went under the King's horse at the Derby wearing her suffragette colours of White, Purple and Green. This is one of the most famous images of the movement organised by the well known Emmeline Pankhurst, whose work towards female enfranchisement earned her fame across the globe.

The Suffragettes are widely seen as the pinnacle of Women's radical action in the early Twentieth Century. However, beyond the passion and drive of such unladylike militancy, were the organisation and aims of this movement as radical as the means used to try to obtain it? Were the Suffragettes alone in the struggle for female emancipation? And how far can the granting of limited female suffrage in 1918 be attributed to the exploits of these women? This pamphlet will analyse this iconic "women's" movement and question how far it can really be seen as part of Radical History.

Democracy At The Turn Of The 20th Century

The Suffragette movement emerged from a political landscape which had seen much change in the preceding years, particularly in terms of the size and composition of the electorate. Following the 3 Great Reforms (the *Representation of the People Acts* or RPAs) of 1832, 1867 and 1884 the majority of males in Britain could vote. The beginnings of formal constitutional opposition to female suffrage were laid out in the terms of the 1832 reform act which stated specifically that it would enfranchise certain "male persons" excluding women even if they met the high qualifications of property, wealth and status. By 1884, whether a man could vote or not depended upon a property qualification; you either needed to own a house or be a lodger paying at least £10 a year and you also needed to have been living in a residence for at least a year. The prevailing ideas of franchise were based upon property and taxation from which the vast majority of women were excluded (unless they had inherited property from their families) and therefore women had very limited legal status.

As a growing proportion of the male population could exercise the right to vote, political parties now had to try to win support by passing measures that pleased the population and to avoid supporting those which would endanger their chances

in upcoming elections. Throughout the Victorian period, the prevailing attitude of the public towards the question of female suffrage was hostile. Overbearing Victorian gender stereotypes and ingrained ideas about separate spheres for men and women meant that not only was the idea of a woman voting seen as inappropriate by a population within which a woman's primary role was as a mother and a wife, it was also seen by many as unnecessary, dangerous and ridiculous. If women were to remain within the domestic sphere they would have no need to vote as they could be represented by their fathers and husbands. The notion of women becoming involved in politics was seen as a threat to the patriarchal Victorian interpretation of the family unit. Prime Minister William Gladstone often gave this as his reason for opposing female suffrage, as he said that it would damage the sanctity of the family.

Of course, these enforced ideologies were only relevant to women of a certain status as working class women had no choice but to diverge from this idyllic image of womanhood and the family because it was necessary for them to work to make ends meet. Despite this, ideas about a woman's place were enforced throughout all walks of society. Due to the fact that much of the population stood against female suffrage, the two main parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals (Tories and Whigs) were wary of showing support to this controversial issue in case it lost them popularity.

Beginning Of Campaigning

The campaign for the woman's right to vote began in 1867 around the time of the second reform act. The MP John Stuart Mill suggested an amendment to this reform to allow some measure of female suffrage, again based upon property. When this amendment was declined, women decided to start campaigning themselves for the right to vote. The Suffragists were a peaceful body who used constitutional and non-violent methods in their campaigning such as lobbying MPs, rallies and petitions. Although there were many suffrage groups across the country, the majority of these were coordinated under the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), run by Millicent Fawcett. Small steps were made towards the vote using these methods.

By the turn of the century women were allowed to vote in municipal and local elections and also became more involved in the public sphere; sitting on school boards and becoming poor law guardians.

The Women's Social And Political Union

Emmeline Pankhurst was the widow of the socialist MP Richard Pankhurst who had campaigned for measures such as universal adult suffrage, payment of salaries for MPs, Disestablishment of the Church of England, free compulsory elementary education, Irish Home Rule, land nationalization and the abolition of the House of Lords. In 1903 she, with the help of three of her daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, set up the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester. The initial aim of the organisation was to recruit more working class women into the fight for female enfranchisement.

To begin with the group operating similarly to other suffrage organisations but 1905 saw the first use of more extreme action when Christabel Pankhurst and her friend Annie Kenney interrupted a Liberal Party rally heckling Winston Churchill and Edward Grey shouting for votes for women. The women were removed from the building by police who they spat at and kicked and after refusing to pay their fine, they were sentenced to 3 days in prison. This sparked the beginning of the Suffragette's militant campaign to get the vote. Tired of conventional methods failing to achieve the vote even after 40 years, these women began destroying ballots, chaining themselves to parliamentary railings and even carried out a series of widespread arson attacks at the homes of politicians who stood against the cause of votes for women.

The militancy employed by the WSPU was not only a more extreme approach, it was a sensationalist tactic. Newspapers at the time had not previously given much attention to the suffrage movement. Such public militant actions were published in both local and national newspapers, which brought the cause of votes for women onto the national stage and the question of female suffrage into the consciousness of the public. The very word 'Suffragette' was coined by the *Daily Mail* as a derogatory nickname for the militant campaigners who, rather than being perturbed by this, adopted the title, and even named one of their magazines after it. It is this militancy, combined with the contemporary controversial nature of the movement that earned the WSPU and the Suffragette's their "radical" name in history.

Between 1903 – 1906 the introduction of militancy was not the only change to the WSPU. Christabel Pankhurst, Emmeline's eldest daughter, was made the official leader of the WSPU. In 1903 the society had strong ties with the Labour Party, especially with the party leader Keir Hardy, which is not surprising given the polit-

ical history for this family. Between these dates however, the WSPU began to distance itself from being a working class, inclusive campaign and became increasingly elitist. In 1906 the organisation moved its central base to London. This geographical change seems to physically represent the shift in the ideals and approach of the Women's Social and Political Union at this time.

Structure

The Women's Social and Political Union was essentially a hierarchy and an autocratic organisation. An unelected central committee comprising of members of the Pankhurst family Emmeline, Christabel, Adela, Sylvia (who was secretary) and their close friends Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (treasurer) and Annie Kenney, made the decisions. They were aided somewhat by a sub-committee again comprising of close family friends, but the society was essentially a top-down organisation with rank and file members having little or no say in decision making. Once these decisions had been made, they were relayed to the national branches of the WSPU by eleven (unelected) regional officers.

This lack of democracy within the organisation faced criticism from within. Teresa Billington-Grieg and Charlotte Despard were members of the WSPU who wanted it to be more democratic. In 1907, they drafted a new 'constitution' which they presented at a national conference which included amendments to the way the society was run in order to make it more democratic and allow members to take part in decision making. Emmeline dramatically tore it up and said "Our women should walk in step and take their instructions like an army". These women were described as "socialist suffragettes" and broke away from the WSPU to form a different, democratic suffrage organisation, the Women's Freedom League. They were the first of many to split away from the organisation. Not only were many women annoyed that they didn't have any input in decision making, the lack of democracy was seen as hypocritical. The WSPU were campaigning to allow some women to be involved in the British democratic system, yet they did not have democracy within their own movement.

Aims

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The Split From The Labour Party

Between 1903 and 1906, Christabel cut all official ties with the Labour Party. The reason she gave was that she didn't want the movement to be party aligned and that it should be politically neutral in terms of any allegiance. However, there were other motives behind this. Distancing themselves from the Labour Party would make it easier for the WSPU to recruit women from the social elite. Christabel wanted to attract more middle class women to the movement as 1) they were able to contribute financially to the WSPU which had the aim of raising £20,000 and 2) she believed that the House of Commons would be "more impressed by the demonstrations of the feminine bourgeoisie than of the female proletariat." She wanted to disassociate the group from working women and keep it exclusively middle class.

This break from the party was described by Sylvia as an example of her sister's "incipiant Toryism". The sisters were politically opposed in many respects and this is how Sylvia described Christabel's attitude towards working women's participation;

> a working woman's movement is of no value; working women are the weakest position of the sex; how could it be otherwise? Their lives are too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the contest. Surely it is a mistake to use the weakest for the struggle. We want picked women, the very strongest and the most intelligent.

Difficulties For Working Women

Working class women were never asked to leave the organisation, but in some ways they were alienated. Not only were working class women distanced by the fact that the main organisers of the group were more interested in recruiting middle and upper class women, some of the methods of campaigning used and the times and places of meetings and events made it difficult for working women to become involved.

WSPU meetings were a social event. They were often held in member's houses and the women would not only talk politics but they would drink tea, eat cake and get to know one another. These meetings were rarely held at times which working class women were available. As middle class women didn't need to work, meetings were often held in the day time. Even when working class women were at home, they had very little time for themselves. Juggling working, child care and domestic tasks meant that they were only available, if at all, for short periods in the evenings. Another problem for working women with the meetings being held at middle class homes was that working class women were not expected to be in middle class areas.

Militancy And Hypocrisy

Militancy also alienated working class women in that they found it very difficult to partake in such activities because they, unlike the middle class members, did not have maids or servants to care for their families if they were to be put in prison. The WSPU began trying to gain sympathy from the public. Middle class women would deliberately get themselves arrested and put in prison and would play the victim. The public were horrified by the treatment of respectable women, which distanced working women further. This tactic did in some ways set back the cause. On 'Black Friday', for example, when suffragette demonstrators were beaten up by plain clothes policemen, the suffragettes tried to gain sympathy from the public in imposing the idea that they were middle class respectable women who were being victimised by men. However, this was hypocritical as it played on the idea

that women were not equal to men but needed to be protected from them and thus reinforced the hegemony of gender stereotypes. They were campaigning to be recognised as being as strong, responsible, mature and worthy of respect as men, and then undermining it by playing on the patriarchal perception that women were frail, helpless creatures who had to be treated with greater care and special consideration.

Splits From The WSPU

When you look further into the class construction of the Suffragettes you can begin to see that as time passed, the more exclusively middle class they became. The WSPU's early alliance with the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was not welcomed by all members of the ILP. As the women were not campaigning for Adult Suffrage, many Labour Party members saw supporting the movement as counter-productive as it would essentially only benefit and further empower the middle classes. The break from the party confirmed that their aims were limited and again the WSPU faced criticism from within their own ranks, this time about their class composition and elitism.

Dora Montefiore was an adult suffragist who set up the first London Canning Town branch of the WSPU. When she attempted to expand her branches within London without the Pankhursts' prior consent, they decided she was becoming too independent. She broke away from the WSPU in 1908 as she too disagreed with their aim of enfranchising middle class women and not including working class women and men. She was also perturbed by the Pankhursts' will to dominate decisions about where to set up new branches of the movement. There was continuing conflict between the WSPU and its Canning Town branch as it advocated universal adult suffrage not female suffrage on the same grounds as men, and the secretary of the branch Adelaide Knight also resigned due to the elitist aims of the WSPU and because they weren't "keeping their promises to the working woman".

As Christabel wanted to attract more women from the social elite into the movement, many members of the WSPU who had joined the society in its early stages were made to keep their political convictions quiet in order not to offend any of the new middle class or more conservative women. Adela Pankhurst was the youngest Pankhurst sister involved in the organisation of the movement. She was known as the black sheep among organisers. She, like Sylvia, still held on to the socialist convictions that she had grown up with and believed ultimately in adult suffrage, rather than equal suffrage.

In 1910, the level of militancy had risen to widespread arson attacks and attacks on the homes of politicians. Adela attempted to advise her sister and mother that this level of militancy was loosing the Suffragette's support from the public. She left the WSPU in 1911 for this reason. Emmeline Pankhurst was frightened that Adela would publicly speak out against and humiliate the organisation, and after she made a speech advocating adult suffrage, her mother bought her a one way ticket to Australia, banishing her own daughter to the other side of the world and forbidding her to ever speak in public in England again.

Adela was not the only member of the family to face estrangement by Christabel and Emmeline. In October 1912 Sylvia Pankhurst travelled to London with her American friend Zelie Emmerson to set up a further branch of the WSPU in Bow, East London. Christabel was strongly against setting up a branch in such a working class area but Sylvia elected to speak on behalf of working class women, against the wishes and advice of her mother and sister. In 1913 she founded the East London Federation of Suffragettes. This branch of the WSPU was not only working class in its composition but it was far more democratic than many other branches of the organisation and so conflicted with the ideals set down by Christabel and Emmeline.

In 1913, Christabel was in Paris in hiding from the police who had imprisoned her on several occasions. She summoned Sylvia there and told her either to dissolve the ELFS or be expelled from the organisation. Sylvia refused, and thus she and the branch in Bow were cut off from the main Suffragette movement.

Sylvia realised that the fight for he vote was inextricably linked with the fight against poverty and destitution. Later in life, Sylvia set up the Communist Party. She spent much of her time in Ethiopia fighting against the Italian fascists. When she fell pregnant with the baby of an Italian communist, her mother never spoke to her again as she refused to marry the man or give the child his name.

Another criticism of the WSPU was that it saw gaining a measure of equal franchise as the be all and and all of campaigning. Emmeline Pankhurst said;

> Our members are absolutely single minded; they concentrate all their forces on one object, political equality with men. No member of the WSPU divides her attention between suffrage and other social reforms.

Political equality with men was a much deeper issue than a question of the vote, and even if the WSPU were to be successful, the fact that women would make up such a small portion of the electorate would mean that there would still be overwhelming inequality.

The Women's Social and Political Union began as a society which aimed to include working women in the struggle for the vote. By the end of 1913 the movement had become one in which the ladies were respectable and fashionable. The narrow aims of the WSPU, its autocratic structure and overbearing middle class composition had lead to the estrangement of many campaigners, even members of the Pankhurst family. Theresa Billington Grieg summed up her views when she left the organisation:

> It has cut down its demand from one of sex equality to one of votes on a limited basis. It has suppressed free speech on fundamental issues. It has gradually edged the working class element out of the ranks. It has become socially exclusive, ultra-respectable and narrowly religious.

Radical Suffragists

The suffrage movement was not only made up of the militant suffragettes and other methods of campaigning still continued during the period in which they were active. The radical suffragists are a group barely acknowledged for their effort in campaigning for female suffrage. Only one book exists about their efforts, despite the many years they devoted to the cause. *One Hand Tied Behind Us* by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris tells the story of the factory women in the north of the country who even risked their livelihoods for the cause. Although they were not militant, they were still a radical group of women, as they have been dubbed by Liddington and Norris. Their methods included petitioning and meetings. Women would stand outside the factory gates with petitions, often enduring much abuse from the women that passed them.

Women, Trade Unions And Support From The TUC

They also worked closely with trade unions and attempted to get them on side. One of their great successes was succeeding in gaining support from the Trades Union Council (TUC) for a measure to bring about universal adult suffrage for men and women. In 1901, a factory girl from Ashton-under-Lyne named Helena

Silcock made a speech to the TUC pointing out many of the flaws in the arguments against women being allowed to vote. One of the most important points for her, and many other young women like her, was that many women were unmarried meaning that they had little or no legal status. The argument that women were adequately represented by their husbands was therefore redundant in this respect.

> It is said that women are sufficiently protected by their husbands. I would point out that not all women are wives. There are in fact 5 million working women in this country who have to earn their own livelihood, some protection should be extended to them, so that by means of the vote they may assist in bringing about legislation which will enable them to live and not merely exist.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, trade unions were very hostile towards women. Due to the huge gender pay gap, employers often favoured offering a woman a job as she would be much more easily exploitable than a man and cheaper to employ. This threatened man's chances of employment and so trade unions were naturally wary of allowing women into the ranks. Gaining support from the TUC was therefore a big achievement. In some ways it was very hard for the radical suffragists to campaign. If they were to go to meetings, it often took up the very small time which they had for themselves in between working and household duties. Many of these women also faced great hostility from their husbands. The radical suffragists said that the burdens of work, child care and domestic chores meant that they were campaigning with one hand tied behind them.

Selina Cooper And What The Vote Could Mean

Selina Cooper was a notable figure head in the movement. When a petition of over 60 000 names was presented to parliament for female suffrage, she had collected over one thousand herself. Selina was elected as the first working class poor law guardian. She was very critical of the WSPU in that they concentrated all their efforts into gaining the vote. For Selina and the other factory women the vote was seen as a stepping stone towards further reform and greater emancipation of women in Britain. WSPU ladies did not have to endure the hard conditions which working women were subjected to. The vote, to these women, would allow them a voice to try to better their lifestyles and gain better rights and protection, especially in terms of health and work.

> Women do not want their political power enable them to boast that they are on equal terms with men. They want it for the same purpose as men –to better conditions … make the lot of the worker pleasenter … We do not want it as a mere plaything!

The radical suffragists were not only breaking the stereotype were women could not be involved in politics, they were also disproving the idea that it would be dangerous and harmful to enfranchise them. One of the problems with the militancy of the Suffragettes was that there was a contemporary idea in some circles that allowing women to immerse themselves in the political sphere would mean that they would lose their femininity and become distorted figures of womanhood. To those who thought this, the violence portrayed by the WSPU was to them a confirmation of the dangers of women mixing in politics. The radical suffragists were showing that women could operate in the democratic system which they were trying to gain influence. They were also a pillar for the working classes. Many of the radical suffragists were also involved in other campaigns such as worker's co-operatives, campaigns for birth control and better rights in the work place. For them, the fight for the vote and the fight against exploitation were intertwined and could not be seen as separate entities as they were by the WSPU. Many of the women did not see the point of campaigning for the vote if they did not know how it could be used.

The Representation Of The People Act 1918

In 1918, the fourth *Representation of the People Act* was passed which enfranchised some women in Britain. Women over 30, who met property qualifications, were married and on the local government register could vote. Many factors lead to this decision including the long term work of suffrage groups, the outbreak of World War One, changes in the running of the country and a changing international scene. The work of suffrage groups was important as it had taught women how to operate and without this previous experience, the women would not have been able to exploit the situation so effectively. The political environment also changed during the war and with the end of the militant campaign, the houses became more sympathetic towards the votes for women cause.

In 1915 a coalition government was formed. Previous attitudes and worries held by the Labour and Liberal Parties that enfranchising women would be dangerous, as the women considered for the franchise (women of higher social statuses) would be more inclined towards voting conservative, vanished. David Lloyd

George replaced the anti-suffrage Asquith during the war and again the fact that the WSPU had ceased their militant campaigns were all reasons why parliament was more willing to consider votes for women. The decision to give women the vote may have been affected by the fact that most other commonwealth countries had enfranchised women, as did the USA at the same time as it was being debated in British parliament.

The granting of limited female suffrage in 1918 is often attributed to the First World War. During the war, women began to take on roles in the work place which were previously dominated by men. They also contributed heavily with their work in munitions factories. These new work positions challenged contemporary gender stereotypes however, this was not seen as a permanent by employers, the government or the media. It also physically represented the gap between men and women as while women were at home, men were fighting in France. Although women did gain the vote soon after the war, those who were able to vote were over 30 and had to be on the local government electoral register. This suggests that women's contribution to the war effort was not such a great factor in parliament's decision to include some women in the franchise as, most of the women, for example, who worked in the munitions factories, were under the age of 30 which would infer that the vote was not given to women in recognition of the work they did during the war.

Additionally, the reason for passing the *Representation of the People Bill* was to ensure that men fighting for their country had the right to vote. Men who had been fighting abroad would not be able to vote with the previous system because they had not been living in a British residency for at least a year. Women's contribution to the war effort did allow them the chance to show that they were capable of performing tasks that would previously only been given to men. However, the extension of the franchise in 1918 excluded many of the women who had carried out this important work for the country.

The Reaction to World War One

The WSPU's reaction to the outbreak of the First World War shows the difference in its politics from when it was originally founded. In 1914, Christabel made a deal with the government to end all Suffragette campaigning in return for the release of the Suffragettes who were in prison. Her autocratic control allowed her to do this, despite objections from many Suffragettes such as Kitty Marion. The WSPU, who had burned down the houses of MPs, and whose women had suffered imprison-

ment and even force feeding at the hands of the government, were now working side by side with the state. The organisation began a vigorous patriotic campaign. They changed the name of the magazine *Suffragette* to *Britannica* and led and organised great rallies in the street. They were also involved in the 'white feather' campaign. During World War One, conscientious objectors were often anonymously given white feathers as a symbol of their 'cowardice'. Many women from the WSPU travelled to Russia to speak to the women there to try to keep their men fighting.

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was split over the war. Many of the women wanted to campaign for peace rather than support the war effort, but the leader Millicent Fawcett decided to support the government as she believed that if England was to be invaded by Germany, women would face much worse conditions under the Kaiser than they did with the British government.

The East London Federation however, campaigned to protect working class families from the ravages of war. It campaigned against price rises, for equal pay and a moratorium on debt. They sought to unionise and support women at work.

Conclusions

The Women's Social and Political Union or the "Suffragettes" fought for nearly a decade for the cause of Votes for Women but the contribution of other suffragists seems to have been ignored and marginalised. The work of groups such as the East London Federation of Suffragettes and the Radical Suffragists, not only contributed towards the fight for the vote, but they were instrumental in educating women about issues within the work place and of health, which were very important in terms of further emancipation of women. As Dora Montefiore said the WSPU were not interested in Votes for Women but they fought for "Votes for Ladies".

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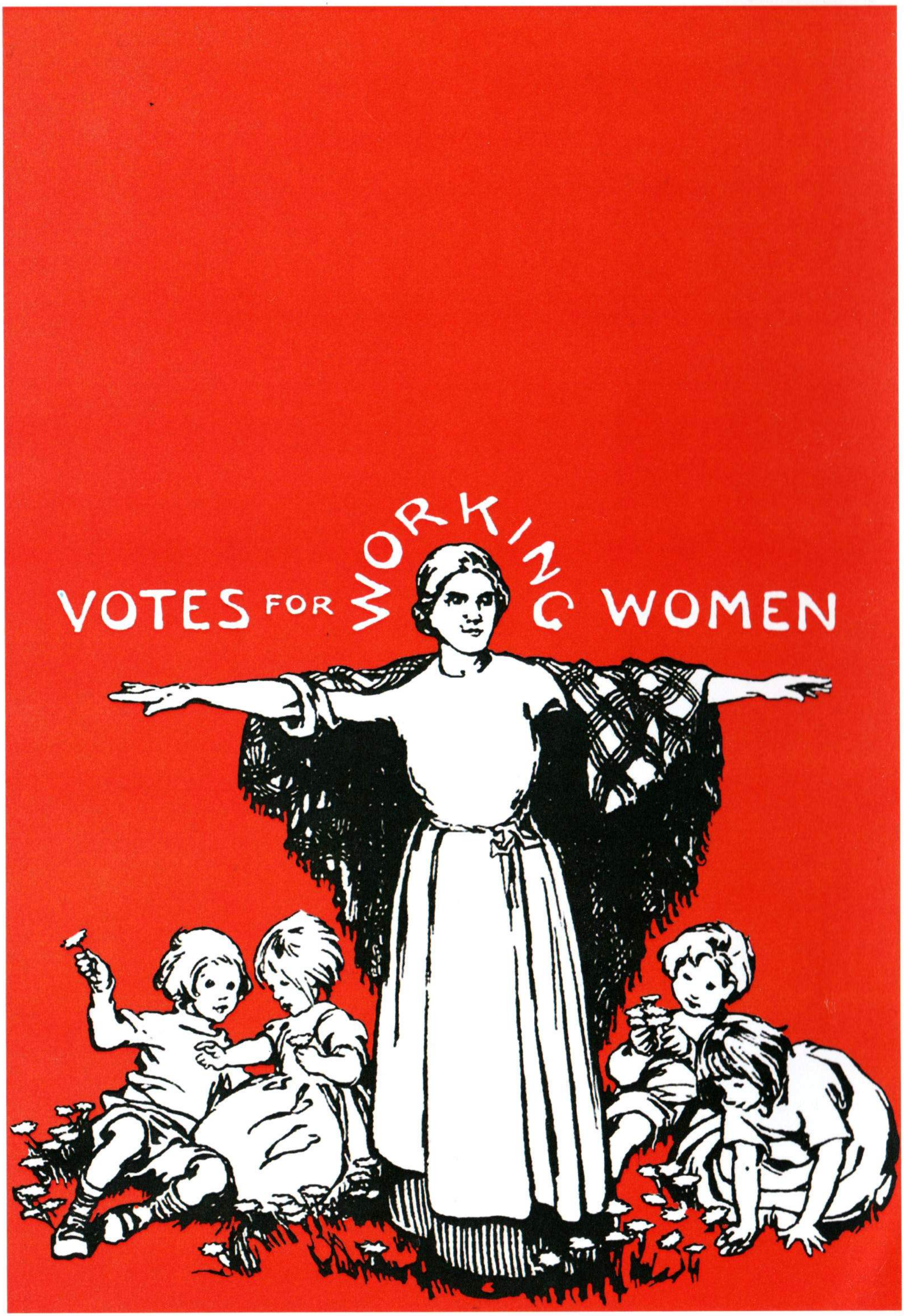
VOTES FOR WORKING WOMEN